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Iran: Roots of Discontent

The fundamental cause of the turmoil in Iran today is the impact of modernization--and especially westernization--on an underdeveloped, conservative society whose cultural and social roots spring from a historical experience very different from that of the western world. This process has been going on for at least a century but it is only in the last two decades that modernization has affected large numbers of people, most of them unequipped emotionally and intellectually to deal with an overload of alien influence. It has not been possible for the government to carefully choose some aspects of modernization and carefully meld these with the existing society, although some intellectuals have insisted that this should have been done. Rather, philosophies, concepts, techniques and technologies have been imported wholesale with little realization that each of these singly or in combination destroyed some aspect of traditional society but did not provide a substitute. Such a massive influx of the new over a period of two centuries might have been manageable but over a period of two decades was simply explosive.

Government policies have deliberately concentrated on rapid and wholesale modernization disregarding, or more likely ignorant of, the impact on the population as a whole. Modernization was seen as the only way to produce a nation capable of competing in the modern world. Although many Iranian politicians have held this as a goal to a greater or lesser degree, the Shah has been the only one with the capability and the power to try to push it through systematically. To do this he cut most of the traditional-minded politicians and higher bureaucrats out of the process and substituted non-political, western-educated technocrats. In addition the Shah suppressed any political activity that did not support his programs. He reasoned, not without justification, that left to themselves Iranian politicians were quarrelsome,

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fractious and overly-ambitious; more capable of blocking someone else's programs than of producing programs of their own.

In the last 15 years Iran has made substantial advances in many areas but there have also been serious shortcomings because of overly-ambitious programs that the existing bureaucratic and technical structures could not adequately support. The government's boasts about Iran's accomplishments have aroused popular expectations that have not been met on the level of the common man. The disillusionment, for example, of the peasant coming to the city only to find his conditions have not improved is all the sharper.

The shortcomings are more easily seen than the accomplishments and are attributed by oppositionists of all stripes to the autocratic role of the Shah, a simplistic explanation that is, however, emotionally satisfying for those who are being overwhelmed by influences they cannot fully comprehend.

Inflation, urban overcrowding, pornography, nightclubs and gambling casinos, conspicuous consumption of a few, corruption and immorality are the popular standards by which modernization is judged, not the growth in the GNP, the per capita income, the balance of payments or the performance of the armed forces in CENTO exercises.

The Shah's failure to create a political structure to support and explain adequately his programs must be counted a major misstep. But it might have been impossible to do so anyway. The growing modern middle class, adequately educated but not wealthy and with some ability to understand Iran's problems in a larger context should have been a natural constituency for the Shah. He did try to organize support here for his programs by creating at various times political parties, and finally a single party, which he hoped would function much in the manner of western parties. However, no monarch has ever had popular support for any length of time and an Iranian politician's popularity springs more from what he opposes than from what he supports. On the highest level, then, attacking the Shah is more praiseworthy than producing a good program.

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Today's troubles arise from all these influences and the Shah's willingness to permit dissent has resulted not in constructive criticism as he probably hoped, but in riots, bombings and killings.

For a substantial part of the population the solution is to reject most aspects of modernization and return to the fundamental precepts of the Koran and the religious law. Properly applied, they argue, these provide an adequate guide to adjusting society to the modern world. The religious leaders provide this intellectual rationale; the common man rioting in the street responds on a more emotional level; things are bad for him because the Shah is a tyrant, surrounded by the corrupt and the ungodly and is a pawn of foreigners who only want to exploit Iran's natural wealth.

The smaller nationalist opposition would agree that the Shah is a tyrant and a tool of foreign interests. Whatever he claims to have done we could have done better, they would say, but then he hasn't really done anything, his whole revolution has been a fraud.

Somewhere in limbo is a silent minority educated and aware of Iran's problems and of what has been accomplished in the last fifteen years but with no mechanism to make their feelings known. They are fearful of a regime in which conservative religious leaders would have a substantial role, but they are not irreligious themselves. They worry about Iran without the Shah as a symbol although they would like to see him with a lower profile. They are politically apathetic because politics has been the domain of the elite or the radical, almost never of the moderate.

The situation in Iran today has similarities to political and social crises in the past. After a long period of disruption, disorder and near paralysis of the political machinery an autocrat has emerged to forcibly impose order-- at least for a while.

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